

RFA Says "No!" to Program That Would Allow Longliners Back Into Florida's East Coast Closed Zone

New Gretna, NJ 8/17/17. On August 10th, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) announced that it had approved an Exempted Fishing Permit (EFP) that would allow commercial longline vessels to re-enter the Florida East Coast Closed Zone and target swordfish.

The Closed Zone, established in 2001, was created to primarily protect juvenile swordfish as well as other species killed as bycatch in the longline fishery that was conducted there, including billfish, overfished shark species, and sea turtles. Buoy gear, which does not take bycatch, replaced longlines in the Closed Zone and is compatible with recreational fishing. Since the area has been closed to longlining, swordfish stocks recovered and catches of sailfish, marlin, yellowfin tuna, and other species improved, increasing the economic return for Florida's sportfishing-related businesses.

However, Dr. David Kerstetter of Nova Southeastern University in Ft. Lauderdale applied and was granted an EFP that authorizes six longline vessels to enter the Closed Zone to supposedly evaluate the effectiveness of the Zone by comparing fishing results in the Closed Zone with those in open areas. The vessels would be allowed to sell their catch to ostensibly offset their expenses.

"This makes absolutely no sense at all," said Jim Donofrio, RFA's Executive Director. "The conservation benefits that have been accruing in the Closed Zone for the past 16 years will likely be lost. The fish we worked so hard to protect will now be caught and sold. And further, we don't need any more studies of the Closed Zone or the longline fishery. It's been studied and analyzed to death. NMFS has no business authorizing this unnecessary and potentially damaging project."

Donofrio added that if NMFS was truly interested in gathering biological and CPUE (catch per unit effort) information from the closed area it would have utilized the recreational fleet which is more than capable of capturing this data. By bowing to the wishes of the longliners, one of the most indiscriminate fishing gears, Donofrio indicated that the approval of the EFP further demonstrates NMFS's institutional bias toward the longline fleet.

Also at risk, besides the fish themselves, is Florida's \$7.6 billion sport fishing industry and related businesses that support nearly 110,000 jobs. "The dollars that might be generated by the sale of swordfish and other species at the dock is a tiny drop in the bucket compared to the economic benefits of healthy and sustainable commercial buoy-

gear and recreational fisheries," continued Donofrio. "Why should we gamble with a closed area program that has been working to everyone's benefit?"

Some have pointed to the Trump Administration as the culprit behind the approval of the longline EFP, but Donofrio believes otherwise. "This is emblematic of a long-standing, systemic dysfunction within the National Marine Fisheries Service," he continued. "NMFS has always had a cozy relationship with the longline industry. It's time to drain the NMFS swamp and do what's right for our publicly-held marine resources, and we strongly encourage newly-appointed Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross to do just that."

RFA members are urged to contact Senator Bill Nelson (FL) at [202-224-5274](tel:202-224-5274) or email Senator Nelson at the following link [CLICK HERE](#). Also, Senator Tim Scott (GA) can be reached at [\(202\) 224-6121](tel:202-224-6121) or email Senator Scott at the following link [CLICK HERE](#).

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About Recreational Fishing Alliance

The Recreational Fishing Alliance is a national, grassroots political action organization representing recreational fishermen and the recreational fishing industry on marine fisheries issues. *The RFA Mission is to safeguard the rights of saltwater anglers, protect marine, boat and tackle industry jobs, and ensure the long-term sustainability of our Nation's saltwater fisheries.* For more information, call 888-JOIN-RFA or visit www.joinrfa.org.